



Region 4 State Parks  
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**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE  
FOR THE  
HOST PAD IMPROVEMENT PROJECT AT  
EDEN BRIDGE – SMITH RIVER STATE PARK**

**November 06, 2014**

**Description of Proposed Action:** Montana State Parks (MSP), a division of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), proposes to improve the existing host site area, including the addition of two host pads with associated utilities at Eden Bridge – Smith River State Park. The project would consist of constructing two gravel pads for Recreational Vehicle (RV) parking, constructing gravel picnic areas adjacent to each gravel pad; installing two underground potable water cisterns, installing two underground septic tanks, constructing one septic drain field, relocating the existing phone and electric pedestal adjacent to each of the two host pads, relocating the existing storage shed to a new location behind the existing vault toilets, and relocating the entrance road to a safer location approximately 100' west of the current entrance.

Providing the basic amenities of stable and level parking pads as well as convenient and reliable electricity, water, sewer and phone will greatly enhance the ability to attract and maintain quality volunteer hosts for the long-term. This will ensure a high quality experience for floaters as well as non-floating visitors.

**Public Process and Comments:** A draft Environmental Assessment proposing this action was posted on September 15, 2014 in the Public Notices section of the Montana State Parks website. Legal notices were published twice each in the *Great Falls Tribune* and *Helena Independent Record*. Public comments were taken for 30 days through October 15, 2014.

Two (2) public comments were received.

**Supportive (1):** One comment was received in general overall support of the project. This comment did not address specific impacts to the physical or human environments that were evaluated within the Environmental Assessment (EA).

**Oppose (1):** One comment was received in opposition to the project. This comment did not address specific impacts to the physical or human environments that were evaluated within the Environmental Assessment (EA). The comment did list three main reasons why he was opposed to the proposed improvements. Those reasons and the responses are listed and addressed below:

Response

Eden Bridge is the take-out site for floaters exiting Smith River State Park & River Corridor. It is managed by Montana State Parks, a division of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, as a unit of Smith River State Park. Smith River State Park is part of a system of state parks. Funding that supports Smith River State Park operations comes primarily from state park user fees, including Smith River float fees for private and commercial use, and light vehicle registrations. Additional funding support comes from federal contracts and grants and retail sales of firewood, camping and other items sold at Eden Bridge and Camp Baker.

The proposed improvements to the existing host pads at Eden Bridge – Smith River State Park & River Corridor include improving existing utilities and amenities (water, sewer, phone) and adding one additional utility amenity (septic system). These amenities are standard throughout the recreation industry for public land management agencies as well as private industry, which provide areas for paid and volunteer employees and hosts of day use and overnight recreation areas.

The improvements also include moving the existing storage building to a new location, thus allowing for increased spacing between the host pads for enhanced privacy and comfort.

The entrance road will be relocated to the west of its current location allowing for direct traffic flow into and out of the parking lot while also creating a larger safety buffer between the entrance road and host pads.

It's important to emphasize that Eden Bridge is the take-out site for floaters exiting Smith River State Park & River Corridor after a multi-day river trip. Safety and customer service are priorities for Montana State Parks. Hosts provide a variety of important services beneficial to floaters exiting the Smith River. These benefits are listed on page 4 of the environmental assessment and are explained in additional detail below:

- Site security for 60 plus vehicles and trailers at a given time: Vehicles at Eden Bridge are parked on-site for 3-5 days at a time. They can be susceptible to break-ins and theft during this period. The presence of the hosts has reduced theft and vandalism to zero incidents over several years.
- Assisting floaters exiting the river: Volunteer hosts assist floaters in a variety of ways, They assist boaters with landing water craft, assist with unloading gear and/or loading watercraft onto trailers or vehicle racks, disseminate vital information such as road conditions or emergency messages from family, assist with vehicular issues such as flat tires, dead batteries or vehicle not present, assist

with floaters who may have first aid or medical issues including timely access to a phone and providing food, water and shelter if needed.

- Collecting floater logs containing valuable user data: Hosts remind floaters to properly complete and submit a floater log which provides Montana State Parks with valuable information regarding their experience. Having hosts actively collecting floater logs greatly increases the percentage returned and in effect the confidence in accuracy with a larger sample size. The logs also alert management to violations or incidents and possible actions needed and the hosts can relay this information to staff in timely manner.
- Documenting incidents (emergency, life threatening and non-life threatening, law and non-law enforcement, accidents, wildlife encounters etc.): Hosts are trained annually to ask questions of floaters related to incidents they may have witnessed or been involved in. Hosts at Eden Bridge play an important role on the front-line, gathering information from floaters regarding real and potential life threatening incidents and are a vital quick link in the chain of alerting Emergency Medical Services (EMS).

This role has become increasingly important due to the increase in black bear encounters. Hosts receive training to gather pertinent information and data regarding any wildlife sightings or encounters. They are required to complete Bear Activity Reports which are crucial to the decision making process by the Bear Management Committee.

- Site maintenance (cleaning/stocking vault toilets, grass mowing, tree trimming, weed control, litter patrol, recycling etc.): Hosts perform a variety of essential tasks at Eden Bridge including daily maintenance of the recycling center and litter patrol. The vault toilets and changing rooms are cleaned twice daily. Building and grounds maintenance is directly related to safety and customer satisfaction.
- Traffic and parking control: Eden Bridge experiences a high volume of vehicular traffic from early in the morning till late in the evening. The hosts monitor parking patterns to ensure the most efficient use of space and parking in the proper areas. This traffic not only includes floaters' vehicles being shuttled to and from Eden Bridge, but also includes non-floating visitors visiting the site to fish, swim and float. Hosts make sure non-floating visitors do not park at the landing or adjacent to the landing.

Hosts also monitor boat traffic at the landing and often direct watercraft to land and/or move their watercraft towards the downstream end of the landing. This allows additional boats approaching Eden Bridge to land safely and prevent missed landings.

- Information sharing with Parks staff (incidents, wildlife encounters, hazards etc.): The hosts and river rangers at Camp Baker maintain contact nearly every day throughout the season. The rangers relay to the hosts, the number of groups, and their permit number, scheduled to arrive at Eden Bridge. The rangers share reports of wildlife encounters at certain camps and areas along the river as well as the locations of sweepers and strainers. The hosts in turn, relay the information noted above to the rangers.

The hosts are in contact with the Park Manager on a weekly basis and provide briefings on all facets of operations.

- Maintaining the lost and found program: Floaters frequently leave personal items at a boat camp or Camp Baker. They often report the lost items to the hosts, who keep a formal log of the item and the owner's personal information. The hosts report this information to the rangers at Camp Baker who ask floaters registered into a specific boat camp to be on the lookout for any lost items. The rangers inform the hosts of the permit number of the first group to utilize a camp where an item had been reported lost or left, which allows the hosts to then quiz the group when they arrive at Camp Baker if they found the item. Over the years, many lost items, including those with high monetary and personal value, have been found and returned to the rightful owner.

- Managing Enterprise merchandise (selling Smith River T-Shirts and future merchandise): Eden Bridge hosts sell Smith River t-shirts and Monte Dolack , "The Smith River in June" prints at Eden Bridge. The revenue generated from the sale of these products revolves back into the Smith River Enterprise Account which supports restocking of new items at both Eden Bridge and Camp Baker, including firewood and safety products like the portable electric fences and bear spray.

Revenue generated from the sale of Enterprise Account items is converted into modified FTE to help fund the river rangers who manage the sales and inventory at Camp Baker.

**Comment 2: The improvements continue the trend in recent years to increase the development footprint in the corridor, which will in turn create new justifications for additional development in the future.**

### Response

The most recent improvements at Eden Bridge over the past few years were recognized as legitimate, justifiable and fundamental to park operations and include the following:

- Installed a small storage building (former fee station from Giant Springs State Park): Prior to the recycled storage building, all maintenance and cleaning supplies were stored in a 5th wheel camper in the northwest corner of the parking

lot. The small building increased the ease, ability and accessibility of storing supplies and equipment. The unsightly trailer was removed, freeing up an additional parking spot.

- Constructed three, gravel-packed parking pads with an associated picnic table and fire ring in the southwest corner of the parking lot: These three camp sites were installed to accommodate overnight camping for hunters from September 01 – November 30 only. This was a recognized need based upon hunters traditionally using the site for overnight camping. Providing a designated camping area and fire ring for hunters concentrated use and resource impacts in a specific area, rather than allowing dispersed camping and fire ring building randomly throughout the site. These sites are also available for the occasional float group that may have the need to camp at Eden Bridge. Examples include; mechanical issues with a vehicle, vehicle was not delivered to Camp Baker, very late coming off river with fatigue issues and don't want to drive, etc.
- Replaced one, single-stall vault toilet with two, single-stall vault toilets each containing a separate changing room: During the peak season of mid May to mid July, it was recognized that the single-stall vault latrine was inadequate to serve the needs of floaters coming off the river. They often had to stand in line and wait to use the latrine. Floaters would use the latrine to change clothing, which increased the demand and wait time. Hosts would often have to allow the public to utilize the bathroom in their personal camper. Providing two, vault latrines, as well as changing rooms, has resolved this issue. The hosts continue to receive numerous favorable comments regarding the improved latrine facilities.
- Replaced two galvanized garbage cans with two bear resistant containers for aluminum can recycling: The original aluminum can recycling center utilized galvanized garbage cans. Lids would blow off, and cans would blow over, creating a mess. Raccoons were able to access the cans, creating undesirable situations. Replacing the cans with bear resistant containers has resolved these problems
- Installed an informational kiosk: The three-panel kiosk is the policy standard for Montana State Parks for disseminating basic park information including a park map, regulations and fee structure as well as an area to post additional notices and special information. The kiosk replaced the 4x4 foot regulations sign.
- Installed a small display case for the Smith River t-shirt and Monte Dolack print, "The Smith River in June": This print is an Enterprise Account item that hosts sell to the public. The revenue generated from the sale of these items revolves back into the Smith River Enterprise Account which supports restocking efforts at Eden Bridge and Camp Baker. This includes firewood and safety products like the portable electric fences and bear spray. This revenue is converted into FTE to help fund the river rangers who manage the sales and inventory at Camp Baker.
- Placed two, above-ground water tanks adjacent to the host pads: Up until 2013, the hosts did not have a potable water source. They would be forced to haul water in or hitch up their trailers and drive into Ulm or Great Falls to restock their internal water tanks. For the past two seasons, the above-ground tanks have alleviated this inconvenience. The host pad improvement project will simply provide buried

water tanks, thus increasing the open space adjacent to the pads and making the site more attractive.

- Placed one, above-ground water tank behind the vault toilets: This water tank was installed to provide a designated and convenient water source for cleaning the vault toilets and changing stations. Prior to this tank being installed, the hosts were forced to haul up buckets of river water to maintain the toilet facilities.

These improvements were recognized as a necessary and appropriate means of providing basic services to the public regarding information, education, safety, resource protection, convenience and comfort. In addition, these improvements provided a potable water source for the hosts and increased their ability to maintain Eden Bridge to Montana State Park standards. The Eden Bridge improvements were long overdue and not completed simply to justify further development, nor are they necessarily a pre-cursor to additional development.

**Comment 3: The proposals incur unnecessary capital costs and future costs for operations and maintenance for an agency that regularly points out it already has inadequate funding to do its job.**

Response

As noted in the Response to Comment #1, the proposed host pad improvements were deemed as necessary and appropriate for a variety of factors.

Section 10d, page 14 of the EA addressed increased use in energy, which recognized a minor increase in energy use.

Section 10f, page 14 addressed the projected maintenance costs, which recognized an anticipated increase between \$150 to \$300 per year. This is an acceptable expense for the operations budget to absorb in order to meet fundamental operational needs.

In 2014, FWP incurred \$480.00 in expenses for pumping services of the hosts' septic tanks. The installation of the septic system will negate this average annual cost for pumping and may actually decrease the overall costs.

**Decision:** Based on the Environmental Assessment and content of public comment, it is my decision to approve Alternative B, the proposed action, to improve the existing host pad area and utilities at Eden Bridge – Smith River State Park.

This action is subject to appeal, which must be submitted to the FWP Director in writing and postmarked within 30 days of this decision notice. The appeal must specifically describe the basis for the appeal, explain how the appellant has previously commented to the Department or participated in the decision making process and how FWP might address the concerns of the appeal.



John Taillie  
Region 4 Parks Manager